

Lesson of Shaba: Carter Risked Serious 'Credibility Gap'

By RICHARD BURT

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 10 — On May 25, when President Carter accused Cuba of having backed the attack by Katangans on Zaire's southern province of Shaba, some intelligence officials doubted that the Administration had conclusive evidence to support the allegation.

Most of the officials, interviewed in recent weeks, agreed that subsequent information on the attack, which began May 11, tended to substantiate Mr. Carter's statement. But at least one high official continued to question the assertion, and others acknowledged that the initial intelligence on the nature and extent of Cuban involvement was inconclusive when the Government made the matter public.

Accordingly, while intelligence specialists are now satisfied that Mr. Carter was correct in asserting that Cuba was deeply involved in training and supplying the invaders, several say in private that the White House narrowly missed coming out of the affair with a serious credibility gap.

Limitations in Political Arena

The Defense Department's senior intelligence official, Adm. Daniel J. Murphy, hinted at this when he said in a speech that the incursion was "an example of the limitations of intelligence in making a political point." In little-noticed remarks to the National Military Intelligence Association, Admiral Murphy also said that the Administration still lacked "what the press would term hard, conclusive, publicly available evidence or proof of Cuban involvement."

Several experts see in the whole affair a series of troubling questions concerning the Administration's use, and possible abuse, of intelligence in conducting foreign policy. The questions include these:

■ Did the Director of Central Intelligence, Adm. Stansfield Turner, in an attempt to respond to the White House's policy needs, exercise proper caution in assessing early reports of Cuban involvement?

■ Were Mr. Carter's advisers, intent on drawing the line against Soviet and Cuban advances in the region, too eager to make political capital out of the Central Intelligence Agency's findings?

■ Why did the White House choose to engage in an open dispute with President Fidel Castro over the issue of Cuban involvement when it was unwilling or unable to make evidence public to support its case?

These questions have set off intense debate in intelligence circles, and Congressional aides report that Senator Birch Bayh, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, has ordered an investigation of the Administration's performance in the affair.

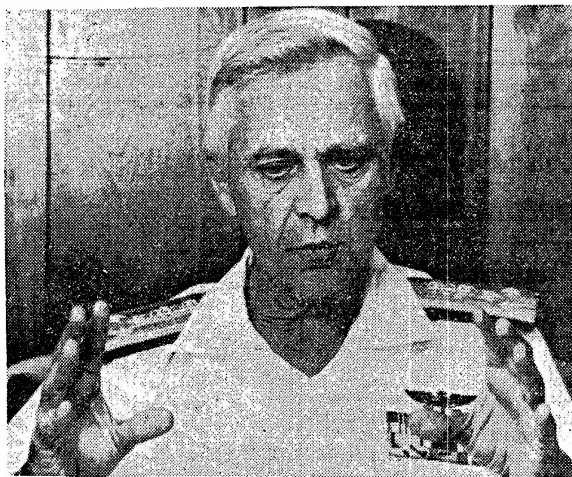
White House-C.I.A. Strains

At the same time the episode is said to have created deep strains between the White House and the C.I.A., with intelligence officials arguing that Presidential aides, in an effort to back up Mr. Carter's contentions, put pressure on the agency to divulge classified information that could have jeopardized sensitive sources. White House officials, for their part, complain that at the outset the agency exaggerated the Cuban role and was unable to provide the President with hard proof with which to back up his statement.

Intelligence information has often played a vital role in efforts by American administrations to build support for controversial foreign policy decisions. In 1962, for example, President John F. Kennedy used photographic evidence to justify his naval blockade of Cuba. Two years later President Lyndon B. Johnson, in an effort to gain Congressional support for escalating the war in Vietnam, said that an intercepted radio message proved that North Vietnamese gunboats had attacked two American warships in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Risk in Strong Allegations

With regard to Shaba, the officials pointed to two factors that, they said, made it risky for the Administration to make strong allegations concerning Cuban involvement. The first is that Zaire and Angola, where the incursion originated, are classified as intelligence-deprived areas, meaning that before and during the incursion intelligence specialists never had a clear picture of what was going on. The officials said that in May



Adm. Daniel J. Murphy, the Pentagon's senior intelligence official, said the Administration lacked "hard, conclusive, publicly available evidence or proof of Cuban involvement" in the Katangan incursion into Zaire last May.

few American reconnaissance satellites and listening devices were focused on the region and that intelligence reports were based almost exclusively on data gathered from African diplomats, agents from other nations and prisoners taken by French and Belgian paratroopers who moved into Shaba in response to the attack.

"What we had," an analyst recalled, "was just a steady accumulation of evidence, some of it contradictory, that built up through the first week of June. What we lacked was any single piece of intelligence to convince the skeptics."

The second factor posing problems for the Administration was the confusing and fast-shifting situation in southeastern Zaire, the scene of almost two decades of constant insurgency. The Katangans, exiled to Angola after the civil war in the former Belgian Congo in the early 1960's, were equipped and trained by Cuban advisers in late 1975 to take a part in the post-independence conflict in Angola that led to the formation of Agostinho Neto's Marxist Government. Although Dr. Neto's victory increased the difficulty of Western intelligence collection in Angola, American analysts believed they had evidence that Cuba continued to provide training and support for the Katangans and helped them carry out their first invasion of Shaba, in March 1977.

Despite this the Central Intelligence Agency is said to have been cautious in interagency discussions in specifying the extent of Cuban responsibility for the 1977 attack, and the White House did not make it an issue in relations with Havana.

Shaba Not Mentioned in Criticism

When some 5,000 Katangans swept into Shaba early in May and quickly seized the mining center of Kolwezi, it appeared at first that the Administration had again decided to play down the possible Cuban role despite continuing reports that Cuban advisers had maintained their close links with the invading force. On May 14 Mr. Carter sharply criticized Cuba for obstructing the "peaceful settlement of disputes," but he did not refer to the Shaba attack.

On May 16, officials said, the State Department sent a message to President Castro asking support in ending the fighting and facilitating a Katangan withdrawal. At the same time the department spokesman, Hodding Carter 3d, told reporters that information concerning Cuban involvement was sketchy.

The following day Mr. Castro called in the chief American diplomat in Havana, Lyle F. Lane, and denied any role in the invasion, saying that he knew of plans for the attack a month or so in advance and tried unsuccessfully to stop it.

As the Administration moved to airlift French and Belgian forces into Zaire to repel the invaders, however, the issue of Cuban involvement suddenly loomed larger. According to officials, a decisive moment came during a meeting at the White House on May 19, when an interagency working group organizing the American airlift under the chairmanship of the State Department's security adviser, David L. Aaron, was told by C.I.A. offi-

cials that Cuba had played a vital role in facilitating the incursion.

C.I.A. Confidence a Surprise

"We all thought that Cuba was somehow involved in the affair," a participant related, "but some people seemed surprised that the C.I.A. seemed so sure of its information."

Immediately after the meeting Mr. Aaron, upon discussing the issue with other White House officials, including the Presidential press secretary, Jody Powell, is said to have instructed the State Department to inform reporters of the C.I.A. finding. At the State Department's noon press briefing that day, Tom Reston, a spokesman, announced that "it is now our understanding that the insurgents in Shaba Province have been trained recently by Cubans." Later in the day Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, in a background briefing, said that he was not aware of Cuban involvement but that his press aide may have seen more recent information.

The State Department statement led to immediate denials by Cuban officials and expressions of skepticism by Senator George McGovern, Democrat of South

Dakota. Administration spokesmen continued to contend that Cuba had played a direct role in supporting the attack, and on May 23 Mr. Reston told reporters that new information confirmed the Administration's case.

On May 24 Mr. Aaron, Mr. Powell, Hamilton Jordan, Mr. Carter's assistant, and the Deputy Secretary of State, Warren M. Christopher, drafted a statement on the Cuban role for Mr. Carter. At a news conference in Chicago the next day he reiterated the charge that Cuba had trained and equipped the Katangans and asserted that it had done nothing to restrain the attack.

The Case Could Go Either Way

In retrospect, intelligence specialists acknowledge that they were troubled by those statements. One official with close access to information available to the White House at the time said: "After looking at it, I realized it was possible to make the case either way. The guy who was briefing the President had a big load on his shoulders." An official in another agency charged with evaluating the information commented, "The President was probably right, but the evidence just wasn't there to back him up."

Asked why the Administration went out on a limb late in May, some officials said it reflected the inevitable White House tendency to shape intelligence to fit policy. "The Cuban thing came along just at the right time," one explained. Referring to Mr. Carter's national security adviser, he went on, "The President was in trouble in the polls for not standing up to Moscow and Havana while Brzezinski and others were getting increasingly upset by events in Africa."

Others also argued that top intelligence aides, particularly Admiral Turner, were perhaps too eager to provide political ammunition for the White House. Admiral Turner is known in the Government as ambitious and keenly interested in policy matters. Earlier in May he had evidently cooperated with White House officials in pursuing the possibility of resuming American aid to covert anti-Marxist groups in Angola.

Still other officials suggested, however, that Admiral Turner, lacking great experience in intelligence questions, might not have recognized what one specialist called "the grayness of these types of cases."

GIVE TO THE FRESH AIR FUND